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Published version

DELLER, Ruth A. (2016). Outdoor queueing, knicker throwing and 100th birthday greetings : newspaper narratives of mature female fans. In: BENNETT, Lucy and BOOTH, Paul, (eds.) Seeing Fans : Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture. Bloomsbury Academic, 197-207.

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Outdoor queuing, knicker-throwing and 100th birthday greetings: newspaper narratives of mature female fans

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In this chapter, I explore the way mature (50+¹) female fans are presented in a range of local and national English-speaking newspapers from around the world. I focus here specifically on female fans of male solo singers, particularly to explore the way gendered fandom is presented when the women are older than the teenage female fans most often associated with male artists (Ehrenreich et al 1992; Din and Cullingford 2004).

Hodkinson notes that participation in music subcultures has often been 'regarded as a temporary accompaniment to the broader experience of being adolescent' (2011: 262) and Cavicchi argues that:

The obsessive activities of fandom - collecting artifacts and photographs, imitating a star's dress and manners, camping overnight for concert tickets, creating fanzines, joining fan clubs - are accepted only as the temporary behaviour of hormone-driven (usually female) teenagers, who, when reaching adulthood, are expected to settle into the more mature behavior of work or motherhood (1998: 6)

Yet, it is becoming clear that music fandom is no longer the sole preserve of the young. Indeed, there is a growing body of research into older/long-standing fandoms. Areas covered by such work include: long-standing fan communities and subcultures (e.g. Baker 2014, Bury et al 2013, Deller 2014); fan identities, practices and age (e.g. Bennett 2006, Connell 2011, Hodkinson 2011) nostalgia, memory and the role of music in people's life course (e.g. Forman 2012, Harrington and Bielby 2010,

¹ 50+ was chosen as the core age group, because, often, products and services aimed at 'mature' markets, such as magazine subscriptions or holidays, are directed at audiences of 50 or over. Therefore, it was deemed to be an age at which people might be considered 'mature' by the press. However, as the article spans over 20 years, in some of the earlier articles, the fans and the artists are younger than this cut-off point.

Pope and Williams 2011). However, what is less common is an exploration of the way older fans are presented in wider media.

Many authors have observed the way fans have been stigmatised in media and popular culture. In her oft-cited chapter 'Fandom as Pathology', Joli Jensen argues these representations fall into two key categories:

the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd... these two images of fans are based in an implicit critique of modern life. Fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction... Once fans are characterized as deviant, they can be treated as disreputable, even dangerous 'others.' (Jensen 1992: 9)

Daniel Cavicchi echoes similar concerns, arguing:

At worst, fans are characterized as pathological and deviant... At best, they are a musing and quaint, suitable for a three-minute slot on Entertainment Tonight' (Cavicchi 1998: 6)

In this chapter, I explore how similar representations to those described by Jensen can be found in newspaper narratives of older fans, but the emphasis is often less on fans' 'deviance' or 'other' ness as a source of *threat*, but as a source of humour. Fans are presented more as the 'amusing and quaint' type Cavicchi identifies, particularly in regional and local press where they provide a source of feel-good amusement, allowing readers to position these women as eccentric curiosities who've never grown out of teenage crushes; whilst also offering a sympathetic nod to their roles as wives, parents and grandparents – these fans may be 'other' but they are an 'other' the reader may be familiar with.

Methodology

I performed a Nexis search on all English language newspapers² using the key term '[Artist name] fan' to find any reference to fans of selected male solo artists from English-speaking countries. These artists were all chosen for the longevity of their careers, the genre of their music (middle-of-the-road pop/rock) and their appeal to a largely female audience. The artists selected were: Tom Jones, Rod Stewart, Michael Ball, Cliff Richard (UK); Donny Osmond, Neil Diamond, Barry Manilow (USA) and Daniel O'Donnell (Ireland)³. Articles returned by Nexis dated from 1982 until February 2015 although the bulk of results were from 1995 onwards, due to institutional subscription.

I read the headline and first paragraph of every article for each star. For the three stars with the median number of results, I conducted a textual analysis of every article, using a coding sheet to identify key categories and mentions. For all stars, a stratified sample of articles representing the dominant themes in news representation of fans were analysed to provide qualitative material.

The fandoms chosen for the content analysis were Tom Jones (235 results), Barry Manilow (297) and Daniel O'Donnell (308). Richard, Stewart and Diamond returned a larger number of results; Osmond and Ball significantly fewer. For the content analysis, repeat articles (for example, where multiple regional papers ran the same story) were removed from figures, as were mentions in the letters pages⁴ and classifieds.

² For some publications, such as the *Guardian* and Daily Mail, Nexis also returned results from their associated websites.

³ Other artists, including Michael Bolton and Chris de Burgh, returned few relevant results. Younger artists who appealed to an older audience such as Michael Bublé and Westlife were initially searched for but it proved difficult to extract articles just featuring older fans when many also featured younger ones.

⁴ The letters pages provided interesting material, as has been noted in other fan studies (Vermorel and Vermorel 1985; Sabal 1992) but did not fit the scope of this chapter. Common themes of letters from fans included praising a star and their latest release/tour; criticising the newspaper's coverage or reviews of a star; complaining about poor service at gig venues or criticising the newspaper's coverage of fans themselves – this last point is addressed in the chapter.

Table 1. Summary of article content

	All articles	Cursory mentions only	National press	Regional or local press	Articles not referring to mature female fans	Derogatory reference to fandom	Fan 'excess'
Jones	235	37%	41%	59%	14%	4%	21%
Manilow	297	39%	48%	52%	12%	14%	18%
O'Donnell	308	19%	36%	64%	5%	5%	36%

In Table 1 we can see an overview of some of the article content. 'Cursory mentions only' refers to articles where only a passing mention was made, such as a profile of another celebrity or a local resident (in the case of local press) making a brief reference to their fandom, or (as I return to later) a reference to these fans as a joke in an article that isn't about fandom or the artist concerned. Only a small minority of articles did not mention mature female fans, such as those referring exclusively to younger fans or male fans. 'Derogatory comments' refers to any explicit criticism of fans. 'Excess' refers to any examples where fan excess was highlighted - such as references to someone being a 'superfan', the star's 'biggest fan', owning large amounts of memorabilia etc.

Other types of articles about fans included: gig and album reviews; announcements of tours; obituaries of fans; 'feel-good' stories such as fans celebrating milestone birthdays; interviews with tribute artists⁵; fans meeting the artist; fans hosting charity events; interviews with the artist where fans are mentioned. Certain types of fan practice are notably absent from these stories, including: fanfic/slash, fan video and fan art. Fans are presented as somewhat chaste in their behaviour, preferring to queue politely rather than scream at their idols (except for Tom Jones fans who are

⁵ Mainly relating to Tom Jones, whose tribute artists had fourteen separate articles dedicated to them.

repeatedly presented as knicker-throwing – which I will return to). The omission of these activities could possibly be because of the newspapers' interests, but may also be due to the age of the fans concerned. In the following sections, I look at some of these key themes in more detail.

'Camping out in wind and rain' - Narratives of Excess

Perhaps unsurprisingly, narratives of excess were common in stories about all of these fandoms.

Fans are positioned as being willing to travel anywhere in order to see their idols:

ROD Stewart fan Barbara Clarke-Tune is used to trotting the globe to catch a glimpse of her idol. She has travelled to America, Canada and across Europe during her 30-year obsession with the gravelled-voiced rocker. (Cronin 2004)

IF MICHAEL Ball - the tenor with the god-given voice - ever feels the need for the company of an older woman, he will be spoiled for choice. He is followed across the globe by an army of mostly middle-aged women who are willing to go to great lengths to hear his voice, admire his boyish good looks, and - with the case of one groupie⁶ yesterday - run both her hands through his golden curls. (Verity 2004: 3)

In addition to travelling, they are also associated with block-booking tickets for stars and camping out overnight in order to purchase tickets. Whilst Cavicchi's (1998) account of Springsteen fans associates queuing for tickets overnight with young fans, such stories are common in newspaper accounts of older fans. Queue stories were connected with most of the fandoms studied, although were most common in stories about Cliff Richard and Daniel O'Donnell fans, possibly because these fandoms are associated strongly with long-standing fan communities and fan clubs, and possibly also because both artists tour Britain regularly. In O'Donnell's case, a third of articles about his fans

⁶ The use of 'groupie' here seems humorous when positioned in contrast to the traditional image of the rockstar groupie as a young, sexual being. That this 'groupie' runs her fingers through balls hair only serves to reinforce the humorous and desexualised nature of middle-aged fandom.

mentioned queueing - mainly in local or regional press, although they also made British and Irish national papers on occasion:

DANIEL O'Donnell fans - many of them pensioners - have been camping out in wind and rain for three nights to get front row seats to see their hero. The women, wearing up to four layers of clothing, sleep on deckchairs.... (*Mirror* reporter 2007: 30)

THREE die-hard Daniel O'Donnell fans who have pitched camp outside Plymouth Pavilions have said 'nothing' will stop them queueing to secure front-row tickets - even a bomb⁷... So far they said they'd been soaked by rain and kept awake by high winds, but they passed the time, chatting and reading. (Radford 2010: 3)

In such narratives, the 'die-hard' elderly fans display not youthful excess, but preparedness - bringing deckchairs, flasks and layers of clothing - and 'blitz spirit' - not letting weather or even bombs deter them. These stories are usually presented as 'feel-good' accounts of devotion and camaraderie, possibly because of the age of the fans, who are not seen as 'vulnerable' or 'threatening' in the way a group of teenagers might be. However, sometimes this devotion was deemed to be unnecessary:

DIE-HARD Daniel O'Donnell fans spent three nights camped in the cold for tickets - but they needn't have bothered, as only half were snapped up. (Ridley 2013: 23)

Narratives of queueing situate it as a practice for the elderly by comparing older fans to younger ones who prefer to use the internet, thus implying queueing is not only unnecessary, but out-dated⁸:

John Bultitude, Norwich Theatre Royal spokesman, said: 'The days of people camping out in large numbers and queueing for tickets are becoming more of a thing of the past with the

⁷ The story references the discovery of an unexploded bomb nearby.

⁸ On the subject of technology vs fans, several newspapers also covered the story of a naïve (43 year old) Neil Diamond fan whose technological illiteracy led to her receiving a £2000 phone bill for downloading his album on holiday – despite having the CD. These accounts of technological illiteracy often run contrary to the fans' own accounts of employing technologies in their fandom (see also Bury et al 2013; Deller 2014).

popularity of internet and telephone booking. There are still a handful of customers who enjoy the camaraderie and atmosphere of queuing up outside the theatre to be the first to get tickets in their hands. They see it as part of the experience when it comes to a popular performer like Daniel O'Donnell.' (Nolan 2013)

Attending concerts is not the only activity of excess participated in by older fans. Memorabilia collections are frequently mentioned, often described as 'shrines', extending the fandom as religion metaphor noted by many authors (see O'Guinn 1991; Cavicchi 1998; Löbert 2012):

Jo Wilhelm has a mantra: "Thank God for Rod." To her, singer Rod Stewart - or her Roddy - is sustenance, like air or food; her fandom is practically a career. Her address labels and stationery allude to as much. "Jo Wilhelm, Rod Stewart Fan," they state. (Gregorian 2007: E1)

CROONER crazy Kathleen Collins reckons she's Ireland's biggest Daniel O'Donnell fan - after converting her pub into a SHRINE to the singer. (Milton 2010: 26)

It is going to be an expensive week for devoted Neil Diamond fans Jim and Gaynor Le Comte. The Christchurch couple are going to all four of the rock superstar's shows at the WestpacTrust Centre. They have already paid \$ 720 for their tickets, and will take along plenty of cash to buy T-shirts, coffee mugs, fridge magnets, and other memorabilia... Their house is a shrine to their idols, with memorabilia collected from past tours crammed in every nook and cranny. (Keenan 1999: 1)

In these articles the excess of fandom is discussed in terms of devotion and need –Stewart as sustenance; O'Donnell and Diamond as idols. Whilst memorabilia stories tend to highlight these fans as different or eccentric, these eccentricities can be used for good, as in the case of this Tom Jones fan who opened up her home as a tourist attraction to raise funds for charity:

WALES' biggest Tom Jones fan is inviting people to visit her 'shrine' to the pop legend in aid of Children in Need. Ann Hughes, 67, of Nefyn, has seen Sir Tom scores of times in concert and collected memorabilia for 44 years. She has decided to share her collection of records and photographs and other items for sightseers to view in an upstairs room at her home... There is no charge but people will be asked to make a £2 donation and to buy a raffle ticket. (Powell 2009: 7)

The excessive nature of fans is replicated in the way the press present them as devotees to the stars. Several articles about older fans refer to fandom as if for most people it should be the preserve of teenagers – but for these ‘obsessed’ women, it is something they have never grown out of:

‘YOUR LIFE: OBSESSED! TREASURING LOCKS OF HAIR, TREKKING TO SEE THEIR IDOL AND CREATING A SHRINE IS JUST NORMAL LIFE FOR THESE FANS, WHO NEVER GOT OVER A TEENAGE CRUSH’ (Monti 2007: 28)

IT was a love affair which began decades ago and for hundreds of Donny Osmond Fans at Glasgow's Clyde Auditorium last night their puppy love had not died. (Anderson 2003: 3)

[A]lthough the Irish crooner inspires the type of near-frenzied adoration usually experienced by teen idols such as Justin Timberlake and Gareth Gates, his fans tend to be - how should I phrase this? - more on the mature side. O'Donnell's sell-out gigs attract vast numbers of women who in the 1960s probably considered themselves rather too grown-up to get overexcited about The Beatles. (*Stoke Sentinel* (author unattributed) 2003: 11)

Although some fans are presented as being part of couples, there is a recurring narrative in which husbands are seen as being in ‘competition’ with the stars, albeit in a light-hearted way:

She has been a Rod Stewart fan for 25 years and, according to husband Dan, has the pop singer's pictures plastered all over the laundry room of their Saanich home. "Do I think you're sexy, not as sexy as Rod Stewart," she sang. (Young 2005: A3)

There was Ann Edwards, 49, of Aspley, who was the envy of most in the crowd when she puckered up and planted one on 62-year-old Sir Cliff's cheek. Still reeling like a love-struck teenager 30 minutes later, she said: "If there's one thing we have a lot of in the Cliff Richard fan club, it's long-suffering husbands." (Williams 2003: 20)

Well, the diehards are women. They'll drag their old man along sometimes. (Michael Ball cited in Zuel 2004: 15)

These accounts replicate Löbert's (2012) analysis of Cliff Richard fans and O'Guinn's (1991) account of Barry Manilow fans in which the lack of husbands at gigs is seen as important for many female fans, who see gigs as a space to bond with other women, scream or let themselves have fun away from the normal duties of life:

These accounts address several points of interest for our purposes: first of all, the transformation of the women into a self-mode they perceive as pleasant, one that involves unreserved, 'crazy' and unrestrained behaviour. Secondly, the event is exclusively for the girls; the husbands are deemed unwelcome. Thirdly and finally, the women describe the event's three-hour duration as a period when they are released from their everyday cares and leave their worries behind. (Löbert 2012: 128. See also Larsen and Zubernis 2013)

What is interesting in all these accounts is the positioning of these are married women whose love for male singers is 'indulged' by male partners – a contrast to the younger Barry Manilow fans whose lust-filled letters detailing exactly what they'd like to do to the singer appear in the *Vermorels*' (1985) *Starlust*. This is not to say that there were no references to the sexuality of older female fans in newspaper accounts. Tom Jones fans were repeatedly represented by the stereotype of being 'knicker-throwing', something mentioned in 14% of articles featuring them:

Downstairs in the studio, the Tom Jones Fan Club is tense, poised to fling their laundered pink, white and beige silk underpants at their idol. (Dennis 1993: 1)

Those who have been with Tom from the start must be hoisting up big pants these days rather than lobbing their knickers towards the stage. (Hitt 2009: 26)

These accounts serve to somewhat desexualise the act of knicker-throwing through mentions of pants being laundered, and coming in unflattering shapes and colours. Neither the fan object nor the fans are deemed to be attractive or sexual in any way that could be considered *serious* – a combination of age and lack of relevance. Indeed, fans are told to accept that they, and the object of their affections, are growing old:

TOM JONES fans have been complaining that the Ponty Pelvis's latest publicity shot makes him look, well, his age. "It's not the sexy-looking Tom that we know and love," whined one devotee. They have to learn that it's not unusual for a 68-year-old bloke to look slightly haggard. This pussycat hasn't been new since 1967 so why, why, why can't they let him grow old gracefully? Even with access to the finest nip'n'tuckers money can buy, our idols do grow old as we grow old. (Hitt 2009: 26)

In some accounts, speculation about stars' love lives is seen less as the preserve of women who fancy the star, more that of the concerned grandmother hoping he will settle down:

GRANNY Sarah Carville is looking for a straight answer from her heart-throb singing hero about his love life. The 89-year-old Daniel O'Donnell fan wants the Donegal bachelor to come clean about his romance amid rumours that it's on the rocks. (Roberts 1998 : 9)

As we have seen, newspaper accounts of fan excess persist even when discussing these older fans. Whilst this excess is not criticised as being 'harmful', the accounts often serve to humour these fans and present them as different from 'ordinary' people; or as immature women who've not yet grown out of a teenage crush. In the next section, I explore how similar ideas are developed in articles that are more explicitly critical of these fans.

‘Don't dream of suggesting such heresy to his fans’ – Critical narratives

In her (1992) account of the way fans are presented in media narratives, Jensen notes the way (mainly female) fans are presented as organised mobs. This image can be found in several narratives of female fans, from campaigns to get Tom Jones knighted (*Daily Post* 2006: 7) to Donny Osmond fans who promote his new releases ‘tirelessly’ (Simmonds 2005: E1) and Cliff Richard fans responding to allegations of sexual abuse⁹ by trying to get his singles high in the charts:

Fans of the pop star have been showing their support by buying copies of his 1992 Number 7 hit I Still Believe in You and it is less than 500 copies off the Top 40. (Webb 2014)

However, many critical newspaper narratives of fans as a mass seem to centre their criticisms purely on issues of ‘taste’. Drawing on Bordieu’s (1984) discussion of taste, the likes of Hills (2002) and Van den Bulck and Van Gorp (2011) have noticed how fans can often be characterised by how ‘credible’ or not their fan interests are seen to be – something these particular stars are not:

ABOUT 23,000 Rod Stewart fans descended on the RDS last night for an occasion of questionable taste. (O’Kelly 1995: 5)

If you're a Michael Ball fan, which you shouldn't be... (Holden 2003: 13)

Fans like these don't care that - to the unenlightened - Barry Manilow is sometimes seen as a kitsch icon, a human punch line. With his poofy hair, substantial nose and unblinkingly earnest songs, some see him as a living example of all that is, well ... uncool. If you have these anti-Barry sentiments, though, take our advice: Don't dream of suggesting such heresy to his fans. They don't want to hear it. (Sotonoff and Rees 2004: 1)

Such sentiments are not just found in articles about fans or stars, they can be used as derogatory examples in otherwise unconnected articles:

⁹ At the time of writing, these stories are ongoing and, as yet, no conviction has been made.

More than half the people on unemployment benefits have been on the mooch for over a year. Like being a drug addict or a Barry Manilow fan, it becomes an acceptable way of life for them. (Ruehl 2003: 64)

Frankly, it was a bit of a cliché that Bill, a fanatical devotee to the chugging doomy sounds of Black Sabbath, would be a Satanist. It's like the Rod Stewart fan who also happens to be semi-catatonic -- too predictable. (Hunter 2007: D1)

The most detailed articles about older fans as an undiscerning mass come from Tanya Gold, who wrote two similar accounts of watching concerts with older fans: of Barry Manilow (2008, for *MailOnline*) and Cliff Richard (2010, for the *Daily Telegraph*). In each, Gold positions herself as an outsider and lists the various reasons why she doesn't like Richard or Manilow. She attempts to provide humorous commentary on the alien subcultures of mature female fans¹⁰:

They wear long cocktail gowns under sensible coats and have neatly curled hair, like the Queen. Most are elderly, or nearly elderly. Quite a few are in wheelchairs, or on crutches, and one is blind. It is an odd sight and the young people sauntering past stare politely, as if the women have been beamed down en masse from BHS ... Eventually I give up asking them why they love Barry Manilow. In truth, I don't think they actually know ... Fanilows are a global network, like a weird Barrythemed version of SMERSH, the evil organisation in James Bond. (Gold 2008¹¹)

Cliff's fans have come from everywhere, like homing pigeons. Here they are, from Norwich and Birmingham and York, standing in tidy queues, looking what I would describe as slightly

¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, both columns attracted a number of complaints to the letters pages of the newspapers concerned, arguing that Gold had misrepresented both them and the artist.

¹¹ Gold echoes Bourdieu in this piece when she offers this passing thought: 'I find myself wondering if Manilow Mania is a class thing and whether, when we mock the Fanilows, we are mocking the working class.' However, she quickly follows this with 'Or is Barrymania just a Fanilow's guilty response to lust?' and justifies her criticisms of the Fanilow phenomenon by claiming there are constant calls throughout the show for fans to part with money.

excited. Some are wearing Cliff Richard's face. Not his real face obviously, but a mask, although if he had several I'm sure he'd auction them, because he is famously courteous to his fans. There are Cliff scarves, T-shirts, earrings, watches, jackets, and his own branded perfume, which I sincerely hope isn't actually made of essence of Cliff. The whole impression is rather like being inside Cliff Richard's face... Soon, a little old woman comes up to the edge of the stage with an envelope. Cliff saunters over and does a little dance for her. I decide Cliff loved his mother very much. Either that or he is in 24-hour therapy. (Gold 2010)

Gold's positioning of these women is clear – they are slightly delusional, their fan objects' appeal inexplicable, and the stars themselves must be in need of therapy for indulging fan behaviour.

Although many of the articles discussed thus far seem to position fans as a humorous curiosity, often upon whom the reader (and writer) can look down, these are not the only accounts of older fans. In the next section I explore the way fandom forms part of stories about the life-course of fans, often offering 'feel-good' narratives.

'The perfect surprise for a fan's 100th birthday' – Narratives of lifecourse

Local and regional newspapers are more likely than national newspapers to feature stories of fans, as fan stories offer a human interest angle more beloved of the regional press than the national (Ross 2006). Fan stories can give a local face to the story of a famous singer touring in the region (as in the stories of fans camping outside venues for concert tickets). Feel-good stories look at fans' charitable endeavours, discuss their collections, or mention their experiences of meeting their favourite stars, such as this article, surely written with the intention to give the reader a warm glow inside (whilst also slightly patronising its subject):

AN 85-year-old woman has fulfilled her dream of meeting her idol, singer Michael Ball... and was even given a hug and a peck on the cheek... Edna said: "I couldn't believe it when I was

told I was going to be able to meet him face to face... He is a good looking chap, even though he is many years younger than me. I had my hair done before the concert to look my best for meeting him... (Turner 2009)

Many of the feel-good narratives in local papers are connected to key life events. Harrington and Bielby note the importance of fandom in helping people navigate through life and its milestones: 'Becoming a fan thus re-directs the life course, gives new meaning, structure and purpose to specific life stages, and marks periods of one's personal past... fandom is shaped over time by modifications in the self' (2010: 438). This sense of fandom as an accompaniment to major life events is a recurring feature of newspaper stories about older fans, with local and regional press in particular mentioning fandom in obituaries and stories about retirement:

A HALESOWEN teacher has called it a day after 21 years at Highfields Primary...The avid Cliff Richard fan was bought a piece of pottery by staff and pupils and received an array of flowers and balloons from parents. (Hales News Roundup 2009)

MORE than 200 people are expected to attend the funeral of a popular Clevedon dog trainer who died on June 29... Janet was also an avid Daniel O'Donnell fan and Bristol City supporter. (PR Script Managers 2014)

Another common 'life course' narrative was of fans celebrating milestone birthdays with their favourite music, or receiving (or hoping to) cards or greetings from stars - much as, in the UK, local newspapers regularly cover centenarians receiving birthday messages from The Queen:

A great-grandmother celebrated her 100th birthday with a dance. Annie Bailey got up to dance to one of her favourite Cliff Richard tunes at a party held at a care home in her honour. (Statham 2014)

An international singing star sent a personalised video message as the perfect surprise for a fan's 100th birthday. Country and Irish folk singer Daniel O'Donnell recorded the message for huge fan Doris Stanczyk after a request from friends. (O'Donoghue 2014)

Situating these life-course events within the context of fandom gives readers a lens through which to understand the person mentioned as well as presenting fandom as the preserve of ordinary – or at least identifiable - women: mothers and grandmothers in particular. Indeed, grandmothers are repeatedly referenced throughout these articles, both in feel-good stories where they are people we can enjoy reading about, and as figures of amusement serving to emphasise the outdated-ness of their fan object:

CLIFF Richard fan Jill Stolworthy drives around with a life-sized doll of the singer in her motor to scare off carjackers and other criminals. The star-struck gran loves the wrinkly hitmaker, 73 - who sang chart-topper Living Doll - after first seeing him live 55 years ago aged 13. (Young 2014: 27)

In Neil Diamond's case, the upbeat songs, the Seventies bouffant and the squeaky-clean image combine to produce an entertainer a grandmother could love. That's a big enough turnoff for any self-respecting rock fan. (Honey 2001: R3)

Tom Jones's staying power is quite incredible. He is as huge an idol to modern teenagers as he is to salivating grannies. (Coren 1998 : 24)

Whilst these comments are clearly humorous, they serve to reinforce the idea of granny fandom as somewhat laughable – even if, as in the life-course stories mentioned above, it can offer us an opportunity to have our hearts warmed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the key newspaper narratives about older female fans. Whilst some present heart-warming human interest stories, many depict these fandoms as sources of fun – often through mocking the fan object’s lack of credibility and therefore the fans’ perceived lack of taste. Fans are still, as Jensen argued almost a quarter of a century ago, characterised by their excesses and eccentricities. Their queueing for tickets, spending money on travelling or constructing shrines of merchandise are positioned as activities at best quaint, and at worst ridiculous. Mature fans are frequently humoured and patronised, treated as if they are teenagers who’ve never really grown up whilst simultaneously described as drooling grandmothers throwing their deeply unsexy lingerie at old-aged stars. Despite the caution expressed by some fan scholars (e.g. Cavicchi 1998, Duffett 2013, Hills 2012) about the problems of conflating fandom with religion, we see here that such narratives persist in mainstream media discourse. References to idols, shrines, pilgrimages, relics, worship and devotion permeate these articles as do well-worn terms such as ‘die-hard’.

These narratives work together in making these women an eccentric curiosity whose devotion to a star is almost childlike. Newspaper accounts all position the fans as ‘other’ to the author and reader, yet unthreateningly so – they may be a neighbour, a parent, or more often, a grandmother – a seemingly ‘ordinary’ person whose ‘unusual’ devotion to a star allows for a humorous human interest narrative to be constructed around their curious fandom.

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